

CHAPTER IV

PIONEER LIFE

Wasatch settlers brought to the pioneer struggle very little in the way of material resources. An ox or two, a wagonload of goods, and usually a gun were the items constituting their physical possessions. There were no homes to come to with rugs, furniture, beds, and lights. Nor were there roads, or schools, or church buildings, stores, or a thousand and one other things to which we are accustomed. These had to be built and at the same time crops had to be raised and shelter provided.

Shelter is perhaps a better word than home to describe the first hurried building by a people who had to spend most of their time plowing the land and putting in a crop. A wikiup made of brush, covered with wheat-grass and dirt, or a dugout in a hill—whichever was most expedient—was the common solution.¹

The food was also appropriate to their situation. Elizabeth Fillmore tells how John and Mary Ann Faucett moved to Midway when there were only five families there: "They lived in a dugout the first year and subsisted on roots, large squirrels, and boiled wheat."²

As soon as the first crops were planted, a number of log cabins rose to replace the dugouts and wikiups. They were to last until the sawmills were built to provide the lumber for frame houses and furniture. These log cabins were chinked with mud and roofed with long grass and dirt. The entire family crowded into the single room with a fireplace in one end and the beds in the other. The beds were built into the wall by running

¹John Crook, "History of Wasatch County," *op. cit.*, p. 6.

²E. Z. Fillmore, "Biography of John and Mary Faucett," MSS, (Daughters of Utah Pioneers Historical Collection, Heber City, 1951).

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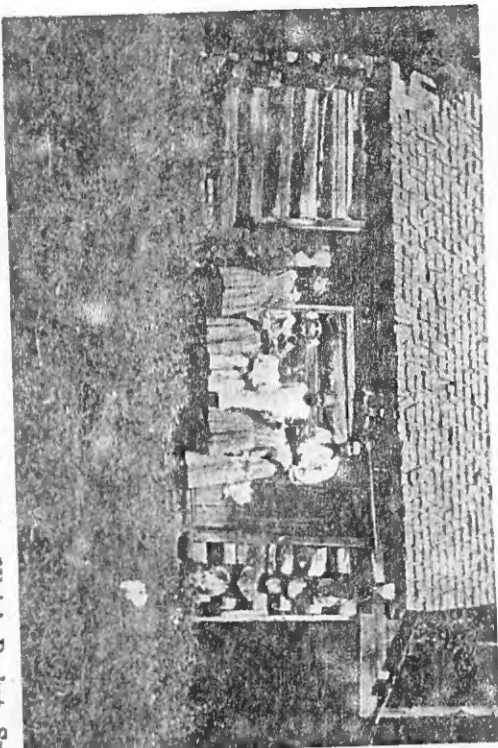
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three logs across the room forming several bunks. Most beds were fitted with straw ticks.³

The table and benches that constituted the common



Example of early log cabin, built by John Ulrich Probst, Sr. and his son Jacob at Midway.

items of furniture were made of slabs and at times there would be some especially prized item, such as a cupboard which the family had carried across the plains. The floors were dirt for the most part, although wooden floors were not unknown. The fireplace was used both for heating and cooking; and since matches were unobtainable, the pioneers started fire with flint or borrowed a light from their neighbors. Borrowing fire was an early morning ritual. John Huber notes that the family who raised the first smoke in the morning could count on someone immediately coming in with a fire

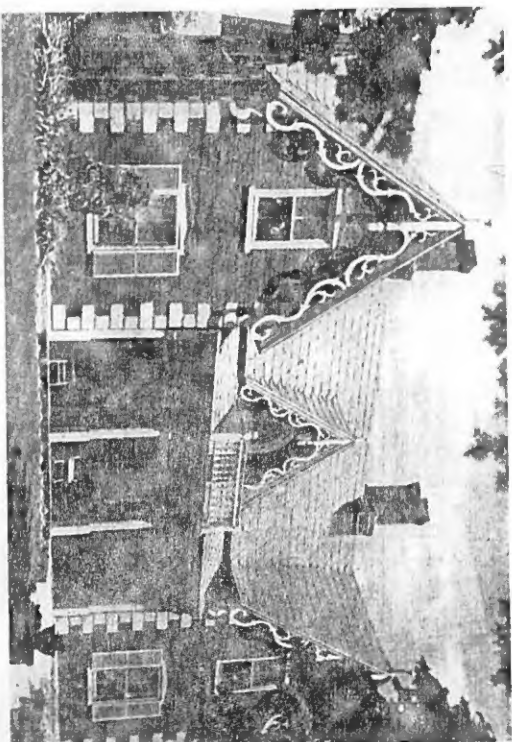
³Dorothy Holmes, "Personal Interview with Henry Van Wagener," MSS, (Daughters of Utah Pioneers Historical Collection, Heber City, 1938).

shovel to get some glowing coals.⁴ Sagebrush was commonly burned in the fireplace, and the pioneer mother did her cooking over the open fire in kettles and griddles. Bread was baked in the family bake-oven placed in front of the fire. Candles or a rag burning in a pan of grease served for light at night.

The early accounts mention lean hard years during this period. Potatoes, bread, and garlic soup were common fare. Wild game was plentiful though, and served to ease the food problem, although bears came into the field and grubbed for carrots and other vegetables.⁵

Clothing was also a great problem. In the summer and fall of 1859 nearly all of the freight trains supplying Camp Floyd passed through the valley, taking advantage

⁴John Huber, "History of Midway Ward," MSS, (Daughters of Utah Pioneers Historical Collection, Heber City, 1920), p. 2.
⁵Crook, "History of Wasatch County," *op. cit.*, p. 16.



First brick home built in Wasatch County. Built by John Watkins. Now owned by Bishop Henry T. Coleman, Midway, 1868.

of the newly constructed road down Provo Canyon. The settlers traded vegetables and grain with them for old wagon covers and seamless sacks. John Crook writes: "The material we got in this way furnished us with about all the common wearing apparel we could get in those days, and men thought themselves well-dressed when they had canvas suits consisting of pants and jumper made from an old wagon sheet."⁶ Shoes were equally scarce; and in the summer many went without, carrying them under their arms to wear in the stubble fields. When the leather soles wore out the uppers were nailed to wooden soles and worn again.

Material want did not necessarily mean unhappiness, for despite their needs the pioneers in Wasatch were reportedly a happy people. Except in the winter months, there was plenty of work to do and everyone was busy. They played as hard as they worked. James Lindsay leaves us a very significant description of Heber in 1862:

There were twenty-five or thirty dirt-covered log cabins with dirt floors; yet everyone was happy. When winter came, we held theaters and dancing in the old style meeting house built of logs, which stood right where John Witt's rock house stands. The old Fort was north across the street. We met at the old log meeting house and danced all night; daylight told us it was time to quit.⁷

Trouble with the Indians was always anticipated, and when the Black Hawk war broke out in the fall of 1865 the people met the problem by moving into the forts.

A fort line had already been established at Heber, and similar preparations were made at Midway. The people from the neighboring communities moved into

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁷James Lindsay, "History of James Lindsay," MSS, (In possession of Mrs. Hazel Giles, Heber City, Utah, 1923).

these settlements and a second phase of pioneer life was initiated.

Fort life was a semi-military, semi-communal affair. The fort at Heber was forty rods square. Each family was given four rods to enclose.⁸ Stock was grazed commonly, guarded during the day and corralled at night. The men in the valley were organized into companies of the territorial militia in order to better defend themselves.

After the termination of the Black Hawk war in 1868 a great many people moved out of the fort and began to establish substantial permanent homes on the various town sites. There had been some building before the war, but the greater part occurred after 1868 and might almost be termed the golden age of pioneer life in the valley.

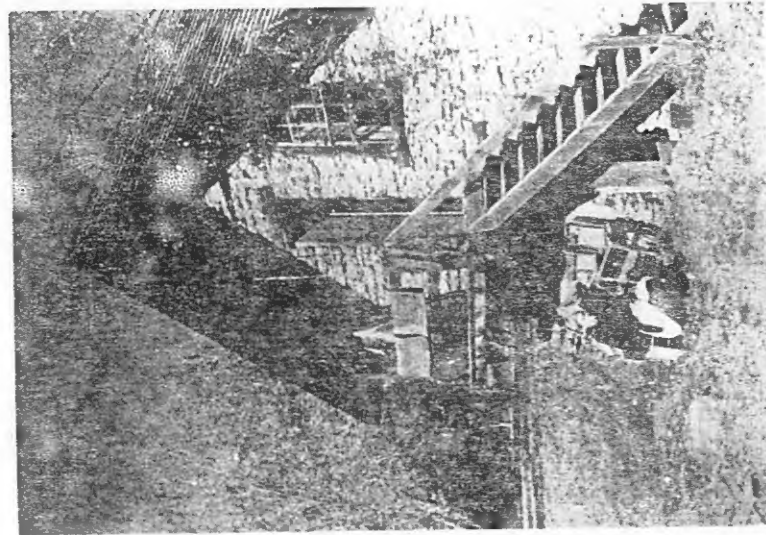
The homes which the pioneers constructed were built of local materials, which were to be had in great abundance. Locally kilned bricks, such as John Watkins of Midway made, potstone (a porous limestone rock obtained from the Midway hot spring deposits), sawed lumber and shingles from numerous mills, together with red sandstone from John Crook's and William Forman's Lake Creek Quarry were used and may still be seen today in a number of homes.

Most houses were built by the owners with the skilled construction such as cabinets and furniture either purchased from the Salt Lake market or made by the few skilled artisans of the town. Jeremiah Robey of Midway, a cabinet maker and carpenter, who had worked on the Nauvoo Temple prior to coming to Midway, was one of the most skilled;⁹ William Bell and John Van Wagoner were also notable cabinet workers.

The good and beautiful life achieved by the pioneers after the first decade is well typified in a description by

⁸Crook, "History of Wasatch County," *op. cit.*, p. 11.

⁹Statement by Emily Coleman, personal interview, 1952.



Example of early Pot-Rock building, built for
milkhouse, in Midway.



John Watkins

Mrs. Emily Coleman, of Midway, of her home built after the settlers moved out of the fort in 1868. The kitchen with its Charter Oak stove and large storage bins was the center of household activity. Mrs. Coleman recalls that her kitchen flour bin would hold up to five hundred pounds of flour. Kitchen utensils were kept shining bright with a mixture of brick powder and ashes, and soft water was drawn from a keg of wood ashes filled with rain water.

The front room floor was usually covered with hooked or braided rugs, or an attractively patterned clip rug made by pulling clothing scraps through burlap sacking. The upstairs was devoted to bedrooms to accommodate the family. Large families were characteristic of the period.¹⁰

One might find a number of other buildings which included equipment to run the household. These might include a vegetable cellar, milk house, and smoke house.

The vegetable cellar was a low-roofed storage bin made by digging a square hole six to eight feet deep in the ground. Simple deep wooden boxes lined the wall; and these were filled with sandy loam for the storing of potatoes, carrots, and other perishable vegetables.

The milk house was a low one-room building. In Midway it was usually constructed of pot rock with a board roof. Whitewashing the milk house with lime was an annual household occasion. The stream from a nearby spring of water ran through a wooden trough in the center of the house and kept it cool. Fresh milk was drawn from shining tin pans on shelves which lined the wall. Here also were kept cooked left-overs to be used for later meals and freshly churned butter in crocks.

The family smoke house was designed for curing meats. It was a square building, usually of oak, with a tepee roof. The family butchering was commonly done

¹⁰*Ibid.*

by a butcher who, on an appointed day, slaughtered meat animals for the whole community. The individual families would then cut up the meat and smoke it while the pioneer mother fashioned pats of sausage from the scraps.

Most families had vegetable gardens. The people experimented with many types of fruit and vegetables and found that they could grow a wide variety of foods. Apples; plums; gooseberries; white, red, and black currants; strawberries; raspberries; cherries; corn; beans; peas; carrots; onions; potatoes; white and blue cabbage; asparagus; lettuce; and cauliflower grew well.

Food was plentiful. The streams were well-stocked with fish, and there was an abundance of wild fowl and game. Bees thrived in the climate.

The family meals were also ample. For breakfast one might have bacon, eggs, hotcakes, southern Virginia biscuits, honey, butter, sausage, creamed jerked beef, and either germade or corn meal cereal. Special pioneer dishes for other meals included ground cherry pudding and peach and honey preserves.

The clothing for the household was made by the pioneer mother. Most families kept a few sheep to furnish wool for spinning. The common cloth was called "jean," a mixture of wool and cotton yarn.¹¹ The cotton yarn was used as the warp of the material. After the wool was shorn from the sheep the women of the household washed and scoured it, carded it by hand into reels, and then spun it into yarn. The woolen yarn, together with the necessary cotton yarn, was sent out to be woven into the jean material. William Aird was the first community weaver in Heber.¹² The cloth was then dyed by the family by using tagalder, rabbit brush, and indigo for color.

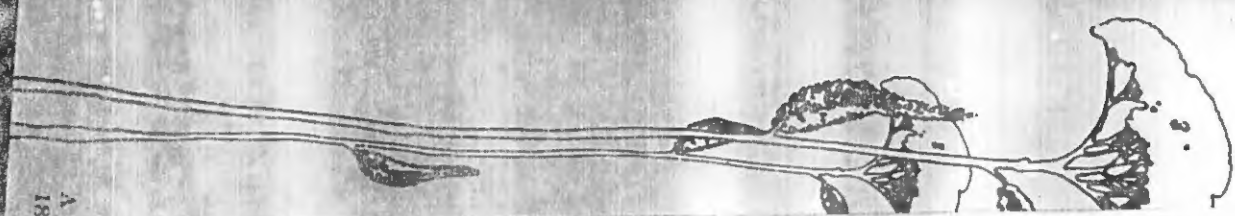
¹¹William Lindsay, "A Brief History of Wasatch County," MSS, (Daughters of Utah Pioneers Historical Collection, Heber City, 1927), p. 3.
¹²*Ibid.*, p. 6.

Shoes were difficult to obtain at this time. The first tannery in the valley was built in 1872 and until then people wore moccasins made of buckskin. Children's shoes were often made by the mother, who sewed fabric tops to the buckskin soles.¹³

In a little over a decade the people of Wasatch County passed through the pioneering stage and changed the frontier into a peaceful community environment.

The ingenuity and resourcefulness of these pioneers provided them with far more than just the necessities of life. With allowance for the customary family and community misfortunes and trials, it might be said, they were a happy people.

¹³Statement by Emily Coleman, personal interview, 1952.



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